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# Quest for one Asean identity and voice

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Asean, a regional grouping of 10 south Asian nations, faces numerous challenges in coming up with a common identity representing the region's 620 million people.

And coming up with a dynamic Asean psychological perception is seen crucial when the Asean Economic Community takes off on Dec 31, 2015.

However, there is always this question whether Asean could establish a clear and meaningful identity for itself to represent a common and compelling voice of the grouping.

The diversity within Asean poses a major hurdle in coming up with a common identity for Asean despite of the fact that the grouping's motto 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community' emphasizes on a single identity.

A common identity shared by all is crucial in integrating the Asean demography.

However, the setback is the diversity in the language, religion, culture, economic parity, and the administrative and polity culture among the member states that keep them and the peoples apart.

This is far different compared with the European Union where



they were easily united through the democratic political ideology and free market economy, apart from a homogenous population.

And the matter gets more complicated when developments in the members states are taken into account, like the political conflict in south Thailand, the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar and also overlapping territorial claims, said Associate Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Rizal Mohd Yaakob of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's History, Politics and Strategy Study Centre.

Asean identity based on historical and cultural nuances is not the answer due to the extent of the diversity within the grouping.

"No commonalities have existed even since long ago due to the differences in the policy,

culture, language, religion and even economy. This scenario is a stark contrast with Europe where member states were bound together by the commonalities that they shared," he said to Bernama recently.

In seeking the convergence point, Asean has to look for something different and create a new identity altogether that reflects the common aspiration of the Asean community itself.

A common identity is pertinent in advocating the three pillars of Asean politics and security, economy and socio-culture - to promote stability and prosperity in the region.

Asean's non-interference diplomacy or quiet diplomacy that prevailed in the formative years of the grouping in the 1960s gave way to constructive engagement in the 1990s. This was part of Asean's identity then.

Universiti Utara Malaysia's (UUM) international studies lecturer Assoc Madya Dr Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani pointed out that all this changed when former Asean secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan introduced fundamental changes to Asean's.